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The Influence of Teacher Leadership in the Career Advancement of Schoolteachers: A Case Study

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the influence of a professional development initiative based on a model of teacher leadership development in the career advancement of a group of school leaders. We investigated the perceptions and understandings held by these school leaders regarding how their experiences as teacher leaders contributed to their career advancement and growth as educational leaders. The findings of this study augment existing scholarship on the nature of leadership development and career advancement in educational systems and educational jurisdictions. The study findings suggest that teacher leadership roles may have a significant effect in generating skills and interest in formal leadership and could potentially be a significant factor in leadership succession planning.

teacher leadership, teacher leaders, career advancement, leadership, succession planning

Background

In this paper, we explore the influence of a professional development initiative based on a model of teacher leadership development in the career advancement of a group of school leaders in the province of Alberta, Canada. The primary research question for this study was: “How do teachers’ experiences with teacher leadership influence their career advancement and movement into formal leadership roles”? To answer this question, we investigated the perceptions and understandings held by these school leaders regarding how their experiences as teacher leaders contributed to their

career advancement and growth as educational leaders.

We interviewed participants who had been part of a teacher leadership development initiative from 1997-2007 to retrospectively examine the impact of their participation on their subsequent career development. The initiative developed as an alliance of four provincial education partners and a major corporate partner in Alberta, Canada. There were over 250 teachers involved as teacher leaders through this initiative, and over 20,000 pages of curriculum-related resources were created by participants (Kullman, Clearly, & Bell, 2003). Central to it was

the concept of teacher leadership for educational improvement in educational technology. What has become clear over the past decade is that the participants have taken on a variety of leadership positions in educational systems across the province. To date, no research has been performed to explore these participants' experiences with teacher leadership and the impact of those experiences on leadership development and career advancement. For this study, it was hypothesized that teacher leadership roles such as the one described in this study are significant in developing leaders to take on more formal¹ leadership roles within the province of Alberta and elsewhere.

Leadership and Career Advancement

There have been many studies describing the increasing difficulty in attracting and recruiting personnel to take on formal leadership roles, particularly for the principalship, in school systems in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (e.g., Fink & Brayman, 2006; Collins, 2004; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2006; Whitaker, 2003). Much of the research suggests "vacancies in school administration are expected to climb" (Stone-Johnson, 2012); furthermore, the predicted shortages are expected to be 1The term formal leadership needs some definition. In this paper, we use the term "formal" to mean administrative appointments within the school system. Such appointments might include principal, vice-principal, curriculum coordinator, superintendent, etc.. Informal leadership roles are those without supervisory responsibilities. In many cases, teacher leadership can be defined as informal. DeMore Palmer (2011), however, suggests that teacher leadership can be either formal or informal. For the most part, however, we are defining teacher leadership as "informal leadership."

most pronounced in rural and remote areas. It has been presumed that the nature of the problem is one of a lack of qualified aspirants and the changing nature of school administration that has made it a less attractive career option. Stone-Johnson argued "the shortage of school leaders that are both qualified and interested has never been more critical" (p. 2). In some cases, research has focused on the inability to find qualified personnel as key to the impending shortage. In most cases, however, recent research suggests that the motivation of teachers to assume formal leadership roles is a more significant issue. Anderson, Brien, McNamara, O'Hara, and McIsaac (2011) suggested that even among qualified personnel, there is a reluctance to take on the positions in school administration. They described 13 factors influencing teachers' reluctance to move into formal administration, the most salient include: inadequate training for the role; demands of formal leadership roles; feelings of isolation; inadequate compensation; and a lack of sense of efficacy to be able to do the work.

In Stone-Johnson's (2012) study, the desire of mid-career teachers to move into the principalship was examined. She argued that the current school reform context in which the principal is subjected to high levels of scrutiny with respect to accountability for student achievement is a significant reason the principalship has become less attractive. She further argued that "many, if not most teachers in mid-career do not intend to become principals.... Fewer teachers are talking about becoming leaders. In fact, in this study, not a single participant aimed to become a school principal" (pp. 14-15).

Although the principalship or headship is not the only formal role which teachers may aspire to in school systems, it is the most obvious route for candidates who wish to embark on educational leadership careers. As such, much of the literature has explored issues with attracting qualified candidates into this role.

Most of the participants in our study had no intention of taking on formal administrative roles. Similarly, Stone-Johnson (2012) stated, "many teachers simply do not want to be principals. They will assume leadership roles but not the general leadership of a school" (p. 15). She further argued that less formal leadership roles could potentially encourage teachers' participation toward more formal involvement in school leadership. Such leadership opportunities "might appeal greatly to teachers like those in this study who felt that the move away from the classroom was highly undesirable" (Stone-Johnson, 2012, p. 15).

Walker and Kwan (2009) explored vice-principals' willingness to move into principal positions. These authors concluded that the most significant factor influencing vice-principals' desire to become principals was "if vice principals are more intensively involved in their own and others' professional development in school, they are more eager to become principals" (p. 606). Professional development and teachers' involvement in working with other teachers' professional learning appear to be significant elements in the motivation of teachers to assume more formal leadership roles in the future. "Frequent involvement in continuous professional development might in turn help vice principals feel confident

enough to apply for principalships so they can put their learning into practice" (Walker & Kwan, 2009, p. 607). In teacher leadership initiatives, such as the one described in this study, teacher professional development is a central element. It is hypothesized that the emphasis on working with other teachers in their professional development would be a facilitating factor in the motivation of teacher leaders to move in to formal school system leadership positions.

Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership, as a concept, has been in the educational lexicon for over two decades (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). It is difficult to establish the origin of the phrase; however, there is still surprisingly little research conducted on the role of teacher leadership, particularly in the context of the career advancement of teachers. Jackson, Burns, Bassett, and Roberts (2010) indicated there is a lack of empirical research into teacher leadership. Much of the literature that does exist focuses on the elements of teacher leadership or the role of teacher leadership in educational improvement. In fact, Reeves (2008) argued that "although the existing teacher leadership literature contains many compelling anecdotes and rhetorical flourishes, it is strikingly unburdened by evidence and systematic research" (p. 1).

Harris and Muijs (2003) identified the benefits of teacher leadership as: (a) improving school effectiveness, (b) improving teacher effectiveness, and (c) contributing to school improvement. Very little has been written on how teacher leadership benefits school systems by means

of leadership development and career advancement. Murphy (2005), however, suggested that in role-based strategies of teacher leadership expanded formal leadership roles for teachers and may function as career ladders for personnel within educational systems. The career ladders discussed by Murphy, however, are not explicitly related to ladder to formal leadership roles; rather, he explains that teacher leadership may ladder towards status as a master teacher. Bunch (2012) suggested that research tracking the career paths of former teacher leaders is scarce. Although there is considerable literature that points to teacher leadership, and the related notion of distributed leadership, as key in enhancing leadership capacity in schools, very few studies have retrospectively explored the career paths of teacher leaders and the extent to which teacher leaders move into more formal educational leadership roles. Reeves (2008) argued that

the leadership shortage may be dire, but the leadership development potential is great, if only schools and systems will tap into the potential of teacher leadership.... The problem is that they [teacher leaders] are largely unknown to the hierarchy and almost certainly not a part of it. (pp. 20-21)

Rhodes and Brundrett (2006) presented the elements that head teachers in the United Kingdom believed were important for leadership talent development. "Most head teachers advocated a degree of empowerment, support, controlled risk-taking and accountability via project work as effective in-house leadership development" (p. 280).

Several elements identified in the Rhodes and Brundrett's (2006) study were also articulated by respondents in this study

as central to their development as leaders. These include: (a) empowerment, (b) support, (c) risk taking, (d) confidence-building; and (e) opportunities to experience other educational contexts outside of their school environment. There are two types of teacher leadership referred to in the literature. "Formal teacher leaders... are often chosen through a selection process after they apply for their positions, and they usually receive training for their responsibilities. Informal teacher leaders, conversely, emerge spontaneously from the teacher ranks" (DeMore Palmer, 2011, p. 42). In this study, we examined the career trajectories of educators who were participants in a formal teacher leadership initiative. As such, the findings of this study are limited to those related to the career advancement of teachers in formal teacher leadership positions.

Methodology

Our primary research question for this study was "How do teachers' experiences with teacher leadership influence their career advancement and movement into formal leadership roles?" To address this question, we adopted an interpretivist approach where "the aim [was] to grasp how we [came] to interpret our own and others' action as meaningful" (Schwandt, 2000, p.192). Our data collection took place primarily through semi-structured interviews. We aimed to develop deep and robust insights into the ways in which teacher leadership had been experienced by former teacher leadership initiative participants. We were particularly interested in describing how participants felt their experiences with

the initiative contributed to their growth as teachers and as educational leaders.

Semi-Structured Interviews

We utilized reputational sampling to invite 21 former participants of the teacher leadership initiative to participate in the study. A pool of potential participants were nominated by the 2Learn.ca society (the organization responsible for the teacher leadership initiative from 1997-2007), and from this group we selected the participants for the study. We selected a group of research participants that held a variety of informal and formal leadership positions in a variety of geographic areas of the province. As such, the conclusions we draw are limited in terms of generalizability. This is in keeping with this type of interpretive research. The findings are sufficiently rich to provide insights into the nature of teacher leadership experiences and their influence on career advancement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. We conducted face-to-face interviews whenever possible; when face-to-face interviews were impractical, we used videoconference technology to conduct interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to search for "linguistic constructions that reveal[ed] interpretative repertoires used by people to make sense of their lives" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 310). The semi-structured format of the interviews was selected to better enable participants to talk about their experiences and perceptions while simultaneously allowing the researchers to probe for more detailed responses to ideas that emerged during the interview. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Initial open-ended questions allowed for participants

to express their own understanding of their experiences with the teacher leadership initiative. The structure was flexible, with the interview questions being used as an initial guide (Sarantakos, 2005). Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. We also collected field notes and accessed documents, provided to us by the participants, to help us describe the contexts within which participants worked. Since the research was based on semi-structured interviews and refined as our knowledge grew, the interview questions were refined over time. Our questions at the outset of the study were:

1. What is the nature of your current role/position?
2. In what ways did your experience with the teacher leadership initiative affect your career aspirations?
3. In what ways did your experience with the teacher leadership initiative affect your understandings of leadership?
4. Briefly describe your experiences with the teacher leadership initiative. How did you come to be involved with the teacher leadership initiative?
5. What happened with respect to your career after you ceased to be involved with the teacher leadership initiative?
6. What elements of the teacher leadership initiative do you feel impacted your future career/leadership experiences?

Data Analysis

Through content analysis (Sarantakos, 2005), the transcripts of the interview data were coded (using NVivo software) for themes and categorized by looking for conceptual patterns (Stake, 2000).

Working within an interpretivist framework, we assigned categories from the constructed meanings of the respondents within the context of the research (Sarrantakos, 2005).

Participant Demographics

The 21 participants worked in all geographic regions of the province at the time of data collection for this study. There were 9 female and 12 male participants involved in the interviews. Their roles are shown in Table 1. All but one of the participants indicated they had advanced in the organizational structure since the time they first became involved in the teacher leadership initiative.

Table 1. Current participant roles	
Teacher	1
Vice Principal/Assistant Principal	2
Principal	3
Superintendent	1
Consultant/Coordinator/Supervisor	11
Ministry of Education	1
Retired/Private Consultant	2

Findings:

Leadership Skill Development

Respondents in this study stated that the most significant features of their teacher leadership experience were the opportunity to develop their skills as teachers and leaders, and the increase in confidence they developed because of the leadership roles they took on. Not surprisingly, many participants also spoke about how

their skills and abilities in the area of educational technology had increased because of their participation.

However, most respondents spoke about their increased skills in presenting, working with teachers, and general leadership abilities. These were attributed by the respondents to their teacher leadership experiences. Also, many respondents spoke about the leadership skills developed during their tenure with this initiative.

What I think really does develop are certain leadership skills in terms of collaboration, in terms of shared decision making, those kinds of skills that you need as a leader are developed through that kind of practice.

This respondent spoke about how his experience affected the way he thought about teaching and learning. His response illustrates the way in which his experience helped to develop skills in working with instructional personnel.

The whole collaborative knowledge building is really what I was able to transfer to my own teaching and understanding of learning in the classroom is that [it] is something that occurs together in that we need to be participatory learners.... I do believe that was one of the starting points in terms of my shifts in thinking of what teaching and learning is.

The respondents perceived their participation in this initiative as having an impact in the development of their leadership abilities. Being given the opportunity to work and lead in an area that is close to their personal interests contributed to their own awareness of their leadership potential. The opportunity to work collaboratively with other teachers appears to be central to participants' understandings of leadership.

Collaboration and Networks

An important element of leadership development, as identified by the respondents, was the networks they had developed through their participation in the provincial teacher leadership initiative. Participants indicated that the networks served as a resource for personal exploration of leadership and also as a source of political influence.

It's the actual connections that you make with the people. So the people, the relationships that I built through the early years of [this initiative], [have] allowed me to stay in contact with [others] provincially.

Participants spoke about the value of the personal connections in networks. The skills developed through their participation in this program were instrumental in their advancement as leaders, and their newly acquired skills gave them the capacity to insert themselves into networks thus enhancing their capacity to gain influence and power. These networks often served as a source of understanding and support of like-minded teachers and administrators.

A lot of us, I think, we had similar stories about push-back.... And so, it was great to get together with other people, share the stories and not spend all our time nursing our wounds, but, actually, talking about ways to... work around that, how to work around it in a positive way... so that we could get more done...

The dissemination of innovative teaching practices is a side effect of this initiative. Most respondents spoke of having the opportunity to be exposed to different teaching practices and sharing them through the teacher leadership networks. This participant stated:

It wasn't just skills we were learning; we were learning excellent teaching practices. There were networking opportunities... Being able to have that opportunity to be a leader as a classroom teacher really opened a lot of doors and was just an invaluable experience.

Their participation in networked relations with other teachers and leaders gave the respondents not only a sense of empowerment but also the actual possibility of influencing decision-making processes in their own school jurisdictions and beyond.

Developing a Broader Perspective

The ability for teachers to move from their individual, familiar contexts to broader perspectives is an important feature of this leadership development process, and it appears to be implicated in both developing leaders' skills and leadership aspirations. It permits those serving as teacher leaders to consider how they might have influence beyond their local level. This participant commented:

It provided me with real provincial perspective, and I'm involved, obviously, now in my role as a superintendent and as deputy [superintendent] before, at the provincial level. [Before this] time I really wasn't.... The [teacher leadership] experience for me was really the first time in my career where I got together with a larger provincial cohort.... And so I'd say it really opened my eyes.

This respondent suggested that his exposure to a broader context initiated a change in how he thought of himself as a teaching professional and as an educational leader. He also spoke about how the exposure to a broader perspective gave him a sense of the influence he could have as a leader. As indicated

in the participant response, this person ascended to the position of superintendent. At the time of his involvement with this teacher leadership initiative, he was already in a formal leadership role; however, his involvement provided him with a perspective beyond his own school and school system. As with many respondents, he stated that he began to see how he could influence education at a system level or even a provincial level because of the exposure to the broader contexts he experienced through his participation.

Recruiting Leaders

We were interested in exploring how this experience may have influenced the way the participants thought about specific aspects of building leadership capacity in school systems. In particular, we were interested in the participants' beliefs about recruitment: Did their participation in this initiative give them new insights into the way school districts recruited new leaders? Participants, particularly those in senior leadership positions, argued that in the current context, it is difficult to recruit highly qualified personnel to formal leadership positions. Some participants suggested that many teachers misunderstand the nature of leadership within school systems, and, consequently, have no aspirations to formal leadership roles. For example, this participant stated that some teachers choose not to move into leadership because of a fear of the enormity of the role.

What I find is people saying things like, I don't want to do that type of work, not understanding the work and what it entails. So I think that they see it being a big job, but they don't really understand.... And once people see the potential or have an opportunity to experience some of the leader-

ship opportunities where they can see they can bring about change, then I see them getting excited about wanting to apply for formal leadership positions.

Participants in the study were asked to describe how they first became involved in the teacher leader initiative. The responses to these questions illustrate the variety of motivations participants had for assuming more responsibility in education systems across the province.

Fostering professional interests to build leadership capacity: The case of technology

Many of the respondents indicated that their interest in technology was the primary motivator for their involvement. Very few suggested that their involvement was motivated by a desire to move toward formal leadership roles within their system. Indeed, respondents stated that they were contacted and invited to participate because they were already interested in technology.

As far as I can recall, I think there was a call-out to our superintendent to say... we are looking for teacher leaders. I'm not even sure if they called them "teacher leaders" back then.... And I was part of a network committee that..., definitely, I love my technology... and they were looking for anyone who is interested in partaking it. And I saw the good in the project and got involved.

This respondent argued that most teachers became involved in the initiative, not because of career aspirations, but because of a "passion" for technology and learning. We asked them "Do you think that teachers come to these kinds of teacher leadership opportunities because they're interested in doing formal administration further down the line?"

Well, I'm sure that there [are] probably some people that do that. I never went into it for that reason. It wasn't about the power or... the position, as it was about passion of working with technology and changing education.

One of the interesting findings in this study is that a curriculum-focussed professional development initiative featuring teacher leadership has an unintended side effect of creating leaders and developing leadership capacity. This might imply that school systems consider curriculum content experts and pedagogical leaders as a potential cohort of formal leadership candidates. In our experience, this is not always the case; formal leadership development is often conceptualized as "generalized" leadership development (e.g. Robinson, 2006).

Although most of the participants did not enter into this initiative for the purpose of advancing within the organizational structure of their school system, career advancement and leadership development of the participants was clearly a result of their involvement in the teacher leader initiative. There are several ways in which respondents suggested the influence of teacher leadership was significant in their leadership development. The following section of this paper identifies the ways in which participants reported this influence on their subsequent careers.

The Influence of Teacher Leadership in Career Advancement

The diversity of factors related to career advancement and leadership development became evident through the course of the study. Some respondents stated that they were attracted to the teacher leader initiative because they were look-

ing for something beyond their classroom teaching role, were looking for leadership positions, or had leadership aspirations. Some respondents were primarily interested in doing work around technology and over time started to think about other kinds of positions for themselves because of their experiences. Other respondents argued that being a part of the initiative made them very visible in their school district. One respondent indicated that her involvement raised her profile with the school jurisdiction and made her a "target" for potential formal leadership positions.

I think that being involved... made me a target for our district higher level consultants and supervisors to notice what I was doing, which put me into an environment that I would have never dreamt of actually applying for a consultant's position. So that kind of threw me out of my safe zone, my classroom, and launched me into working with people at a more global level

A few respondents spoke about the way in which their participation made them visible to senior leaders in their jurisdictions. They suggested that, although they did not get involved with the teacher leadership initiative to further their career aspirations, their involvement put them "on to somebody's radar" because they were observed in the teacher leadership role. Some participants reported that they were already contemplating leadership roles, and, although not the primary motivation for getting involved, their opportunities with the teacher leadership initiative helped them further their leadership aspirations.

Only a few respondents felt that their involvement as teacher leaders had little to do with aspirations for more formal leadership roles. The majority of respon-

dents indicated that their leadership aspirations emerged because of their experience with the initiative. In particular, respondents noted that their involvement allowed them to consider taking risks that allowed them consider moving into areas of greater professional responsibility.

Participants also suggested that their teacher leadership experiences gave them the requisite skills to enable them to apply for more formal positions. The interviews revealed that one of the reasons why teachers who are successful in their classroom practice are hesitant to move into leadership positions is because they believe they will lose their connection with their teaching and learning practices. That is what often discourages them from taking more formal leadership positions. After they move to a leadership role, the participants reported that this experience allowed them to establish a connection between their classroom practices and educational leadership. The respondents suggested that they now perceived educational leadership as being fundamentally about teaching and learning. It is evident that those participants who took a broader perspective on system-level improvement benefitted most from their experiences, and consequently moved into areas of more responsibility.

Some of us moved into administration, but when I reflect on who has and who hasn't, not everyone on the team expanded beyond their own school as much as some of us did. So there are still those that were on the team at one time, but their focus was on their classroom and still is today, as opposed to working beyond that.

This respondent stated that his teacher leadership involvement allowed him to "try on" some leadership roles, while re-

maining primarily in a classroom teaching assignment. The path to more formal leadership positions was characterized by the flexibility afforded by this initiative, namely, teachers did not lose their connection with the classroom while taking some leadership responsibilities. It appears this allowed them to act more confidently in their leadership roles as they could still see the classroom as a safe space to which they could return at any time. This reduced a great deal of the uncertainty associated to career changes and professional advancement.

Discussion and Summary

It became evident during the interviews that participants' experiences in the teacher leader initiative changed their understanding of what it meant to be an educational leader. They were exposed to educational leadership as coaching, mentoring, and they saw educational leadership as an extension of their teaching practice rather than as a purely administrative function. In fact, many of the study respondents stated that once they came to see the principalship, for example, as an extension of their teaching role, they became more comfortable with the prospect of moving into formal leadership roles.

Many participants suggested that experience as a teacher leader raised their profile with school jurisdictions and resulted in formal leadership opportunities. Some indicated that the experience they gained as teacher leaders provided valuable experience that made them viable candidates for formal leadership positions.

Many participants reported that their experience with this teacher leadership ini-

tiative helped them to see themselves as educational leaders. They often had not thought of themselves in this way prior to their involvement. This new sense of self as a leader made it possible for some respondents to contemplate applying for formal leadership positions.

Many teachers who eventually take on leadership roles do not start out with aspirations to move into formal leadership positions. It is the experiences they have working as teacher leaders that promotes the growth of leadership capabilities. Many respondents reported an accidental career path to leadership due to: (a) the visibility that came along with their teacher leadership role, (b) a growth of a sense of efficacy that developed as they practiced teacher leadership, or (c) the development of an identity as a leader as they participated in teacher leadership. The implication for school jurisdictions is that development and recruitment initiatives directed at those who have aspirations to formal leadership positions have the potential to leave out those who do not aspire, but have the appropriate qualities for formal leadership. Similar teacher leadership opportunities may be more effective in attracting highly qualified, but reluctant potential leaders to grow into formal leadership roles. Teacher leadership is not primarily viewed as a mechanism to increase the formal leadership pool, but this is a significant side benefit of meaningful teacher leadership programs. The results of this study seem to confirm Rhodes and Brundrett's (2006) characterization of the elements required leadership development: (a) empowerment, (b) support, (c) risk taking, (d) confidence-building, and (e) opportunities to experience other educational

contexts outside of their school environment. The teacher leader initiative offered the participants the conditions to explore leadership roles in a way that promoted self-confidence and risk taking in familiar environments. Indeed, the entry point for these teachers was their interest in technology and the possibility to enhance their professional practices through the teacher leader initiative. The familiarity with technology built their confidence and allowed them to take further risks and to explore other contexts.

The career paths followed by these teachers were not linear, that is, they did not trace a straight path to formal leadership positions. The interviews revealed that most participants did not perceive themselves as educational leaders and they did not, initially, have the intention to move outside the classroom to take positions of influence within their districts. The teacher leader initiative created the conditions for these teachers to explore and experience leadership roles without leaving the classroom environment. This provided them with an anchor and a safe space to reduce the anxiety and uncertainty associated to career movements and change. The findings of this study suggest that school jurisdictions and policy makers should consider targeted strategies for those teachers who do not readily identify as candidates for formal leadership positions. Much of the literature on principal succession, attraction and recruitment focuses on those teachers who self identify or are "hand picked" by senior leaders. This pool of teachers appears to be dwindling, and the potential for exploring teachers who appear to be reluctant leaders, such as those par-

ticipating in the present study, is worthy of further exploration.

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